

Digital Commons  
@ LMU and LLS

## Journal of Movement Arts Literacy

Volume 3

Number 1 *Laban Studies: Pedagogy in Theory and Practice*

Article 2

2016

# Mining Laban Studies as a Critical Pedagogical Praxis

Sherrie Barr

*Courtesy Professor - University of Oregon, [sherriebarr@gmail.com](mailto:sherriebarr@gmail.com)*

### Author Credentials

Sherrie Barr, M.F.A., C.M.A.

**Editor-in-Chief:** Teresa Heiland

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/jmal>



Part of the [Dance Commons](#), and the [Educational Methods Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Barr, Sherrie (2016) "Mining Laban Studies as a Critical Pedagogical Praxis," *Journal of Movement Arts Literacy*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/jmal/vol3/iss1/2>

This Feature Articles is brought to you for free and open access by the Dance at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Movement Arts Literacy by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).

---

# Mining Laban Studies as a Critical Pedagogical Praxis

## **Abstract**

Mining the writings of Laban and his collaborators through a pedagogical lens reveals philosophical underpinnings of a transformative teaching-learning paradigm, one that shares characteristics with the field of critical pedagogy. An examination of the ways this connection unfolds becomes the entrée to this query. The commonly held beliefs that are in play reflect the innovative thinking of the leading pioneers of the two discourses. In each pedagogical praxis, themes of inclusion, reciprocity, and collaboration can be evidenced in a caring and ethical environment with teachers honoring individual learners while simultaneously celebrating the diversity of experiences students bring to the classroom. This paper explores these connections, in particular the relevance of community as a platform to re-mediate Laban Studies as a pedagogical praxis in today's 21st century world.

## **Keywords**

Laban Studies, Critical Pedagogy, dance pedagogy, community dance practice

## Introduction

I am so ready to teach Laban; I got the 8 actions down cold!  
Sure I can I teach Bartenieff Fundamentals; I can do the Basic 6.  
I learned Laban technique in college; what style do you do?

Many of us probably have heard statements like these through our years of teaching dance. For me, the phrases are grounded in real-life exchanges I have had with colleagues and teachers during my 40 plus year teaching career in higher education within the United States. On the surface, the statements seem to imply an approach to learning and teaching. Probing a bit more, the phrases also suggest discrepancies between what students believe they are learning and what teachers are intending to teach in courses based on Laban Studies. I find these incongruities unsettling, especially when acknowledging the valuable scholarship numerous Laban practitioner-researchers undertake utilizing the framework as an investigating methodology. Such scholarly work invites readers to engage in Laban Studies as a body of knowledge, to critically examine best teaching practices in genres as disparate as ballet and contact improvisation, and in theoretical arenas ranging from dance criticism to dance pedagogy.<sup>1</sup> Surely, the very nature of this research highlights ways in which Laban Studies is as much a tool for the *how* and *why* of teaching and learning as it is a container for the *what* of its content. Yet, as the anecdotal phrases offered at the beginning of this essay suggest, pedagogical ideas embedded within Laban Studies tend to be lost, or, at the very least, forgotten. As a result, the framework's potential for students to experience, explore, and discover is negated.

Unfortunately, students studying Laban Studies, especially those in traditional American educational institutions, are part of a landscape that focuses on assessing right and wrong, with expectations that teachers will transmit the required information to students. This pedagogical model not only affects how students approach learning, but also influences how educators approach teaching. Moreover, the consequences of a classroom with little, if any, open dialogue amongst and between students and teachers denies the social transformation that can be experienced through learning.<sup>2</sup> Happily, I am finding that in many

---

1. For example, see, Melanie Bales, "Ballet Class and LMA: Style as a Resource for Comparative Learning," in *Congress on Research in Dance Conference Proceedings* (1996), 1–12; Isabel Marques, "Dance Education in/and the Postmodern," in *Dance, Power, and Difference: Critical and Feminist Perspectives on Dance Education*, ed. Sherry Shapiro (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1998), 171–185; Cynthia Novack, "Looking at Movement as Culture: Contact Improvisation to Disco," *The Drama Review* 32, no. 4 (1988): 102–19; Marcia Siegel, *The Green Table: Sources of a Classic*, *Dance Research Journal* 22, no. 1 (1989): 15–21.

2. Sherrie Barr and Doug Risner, "Weaving Social Foundations through Dance Pedagogy: A Pedagogy of Uncovering," *Journal of Dance Education* 14, no. 4 (2014): 136–45.

American institutions of higher learning, educational landscapes are shifting. Classroom terrains are being re-imagined due to educators recognizing the value of student-centered teaching approaches. Today, phrases such as “engaging multiple learning styles,” “encouraging critical reflection,” and “honoring diversity” are becoming part of the lexicon of teacher preparation programs. Embedded in these terms are characteristics such as reflexivity, inclusivity, and reciprocity that undergird the field of critical pedagogy, a discourse that emerged as a field of study to interrogate teaching paradigms in the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> These identifying characteristics can also be mined in many of the philosophical and educational *précises* written by Laban and his student collaborators in the first half of the 20th century.<sup>4</sup>

Laban’s commitment to a participatory, transformational pedagogical praxis surfaces through these writings. This is not that surprising. His thinking as a theorist, artist, and educator always focused on the dancers, whether students or professionals, to actively engage in discovering and exploring the possibilities in and of movement. He wanted to investigate the expressive potential of each individual while also exploring ways for the group to forge common bonds of expression. The individuality of learners was encouraged as much as the various differences and multiple perspectives that surfaced in moving. For Laban and those teaching under his guidance, these beliefs propelled movement education to become a pedagogy for the whole person—a unity of mind, body, and spirit. Movement education was a springboard not just to understand movement, but, also, to know oneself and to participate in society.

The possibilities of mining Laban Studies as a pedagogical praxis becomes more than a curiosity when we recognize commonly shared ideas between Laban Studies and critical pedagogy. We begin to see ways in which Laban Studies, independent of its content or application, can be engaged as a pedagogical paradigm. However, interrogating Laban Studies as a teaching-learning paradigm raises important questions, some that are as much about dance education and pedagogy as Laban Studies. For instance, why has content that purposely invites educators to engage in learning as a holistic experience become a scenario marked by narrow end-gain perspectives? Are we, as educators, using all that is within Laban Studies to inform the *how* and *why* of our teaching? Can illuminating shared principles between the fields of critical pedagogy and Laban Studies facilitate a deeper understanding of pedagogical beliefs and values rooted in Laban Studies?

---

3. See Myria Allen et al., “Feminist Pedagogy: Identifying Basic Principles,” *Academic Exchange Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (2002): 67–72; Carolyn Shrewsbury, “What is Feminist Pedagogy?” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 1/2 (1997): 166–73.

4. Vera Maletić, *Body–Space–Expression* (Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter, 1987).

My hope is that by reflecting on these questions, pedagogical knowledge suggested within Laban Studies can begin to surface. In turn, a landscape in which we are invited to engage anew in Laban Studies as a teaching-learning paradigm—fostered as much in terms of *how* and *why* our students are learning as *how* and *why* we are teaching—comes to light. These reflective questions are meant to be guideposts for a journey that is both theoretical and practical, illuminating insights into the fertile underpinnings of Laban Studies, as opposed to providing conclusive answers or specific teaching strategies. Rather, my intent in culling through the writings of Laban, his colleagues, and contemporary Laban scholars is to explore the possibilities of creating a platform to revitalize the pedagogical relevance of Laban Studies in the 21st century. In doing so, my aim is to probe what it means to be a Laban educator in the larger world of today.

### Uncovering a Pedagogical Relationship

Although the primary focus of this inquiry is not an examination of critical pedagogy, a brief overview is warranted in order to better situate its entwinement with Laban Studies. The field of critical pedagogy is a transformative democratic pedagogy. As a discipline, critical pedagogy contains various emphases, each one highlighting ways in which the underrepresentation and marginalization of a class of people, based on issues such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, impacts educational institutions of learning.<sup>5</sup> Critical pedagogy theorists and scholars question traditions, beliefs, and taken-for-granted assumptions about power structures within institutions and classrooms. For instance, how are knowledge and its associated reality constructed, how are such realities legitimized, and who is left out and why? Disrupting the authority of a dominant culture can be unsettling for students who do not see the reflections of their skin color and real-life experiences in those of their teachers, and for teachers needing to question the unspoken privileges of their own lives to understand the real-life experiences of their students. Teachers, typically cast in the role of experts and keepers of knowledge, become challenged by *how* to teach and *why* to teach it, while students, traditionally viewed as receptacles of this information transmission, need to re-negotiate *how* to learn.<sup>6</sup> A dialogue can emerge from such unfamiliarity in which multiple voices, each unique and holding value, are recognized and heard. This dialogue, girded by meaningful student-teacher relationships, encourages true learning. It is a scenario in which knowledge becomes a liberating process, one that is socially constructed as opposed to being a series of accepted disparate facts delivered by a teacher. Critical pedagogy, by

---

5. Barr and Risner, “Weaving Social Foundations through Dance Pedagogy.”

6. Antonio Darder et al., “Critical Pedagogy: An Introduction,” in *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, ed. A. Darder, M. Baltodano, and R. Torres (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1–20.

providing approaches to such a teaching-learning paradigm, becomes a praxis for “building connections between the student, the teacher . . . content . . . and community” that is at once liberating and transforming.<sup>7</sup>

The roots of critical pedagogy arose in the 1970s, through the work of Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire. His ideas, arising from his own experiences in an educational system that saw him as an outlier,<sup>8</sup> were considered as radical and revolutionary as Laban’s thinking and writings about movement were in the first half of the 20th century.<sup>9</sup> Although the language used by these two innovative thinkers emerges from uniquely different socio-political, cultural eras, their respective philosophies showcase a distinct relationship. For instance, their respective writings can be read as a rallying cry for teachers to advocate for the dream of a true and just education for all children. Another example is the way in which Laban’s ideas about a teacher as a creative artist bring forward Freire’s thoughts about teachers being facilitators for learning. That is, teaching was not about depositing information into students, what Freire referenced as “the banking method.”<sup>10</sup> Although they acknowledged the many challenges associated with effective teaching, (e.g., engaging students in all their capacities, honoring the diverse experiences that each student brings to their learning), both also equally recognized the importance of teachers to partake in the liberating potential of learning.<sup>11</sup>

One example of Laban advocating for such a transformative pedagogy can be found in a 1938 passage written as he was leaving Germany due to the growing impact of Nazi ideology.

Why not say boldly that the art tutor is a guide to the dream side of life? Such clear formulation of education through arts is avoided, because the dream side of human nature has very much fallen into disrepute. It is also assumed that the human capacity of becoming conscious of the dream side of our life inevitably leads to some irrational mysticism, which cannot be really mastered and controlled. . . . Exactly the opposite is, however, the case.<sup>12</sup>

---

7. Sherilyn Ottey, “Critical Pedagogical Theory and the Dance Educator,” *Arts Education Policy Review* 98, no. 2 (1996): 32.

8. Marques, “Dance Education in/and the Postmodern.”

9. Karen Bradley, *Rudolf Laban* (London: Routledge, 2009).

10. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).

11. Marques, “Dance Education in/and the Postmodern.”

12. Rudolf Laban, “Education Through the Arts,” in *Rudolf Laban Speaks about Movement and Dance*, ed. Lisa Ullmann (Surrey, Great Britain: The Art of Movement Centre, 1970), 3.

In 1993, a little more than 50 years later while writing in his home country of Brazil, Freire was equally adamant about encouraging teachers to stay true to all that education can be:

This capacity to always begin anew, to make, to reconstruct, and to not spoil, to refuse to bureaucratize the mind, to understand and to live as a process—live to become—is something that always accompanied me through life. This is an indispensable quality of a good teacher.<sup>13</sup>

Freire's advocacy for educators, "to understand and to live as a process—live to become," underlies Laban's concern to engage the *human capacity* of the whole person—mind, body, and spirit—in his teaching and his dance making. Dance education then becomes a pathway to understanding movement, knowing oneself, and participating in society. Lisa Ullmann, Laban's protégé and eventual guardian of many of his papers, confirms this idea when discussing her mentor's aim for creative educational dance, "to help people through dancing to find bodily relation to the whole of existence."<sup>14</sup> This philosophy also weaves through the numerous emphases of critical pedagogy as poignantly expressed by bell hooks, cultural critic, pedagogue, and scholar. She writes of an "engaged pedagogy," one in which mind, body, and spirit—the whole of a person—must be present for all stakeholders, if true learning is to occur.<sup>15</sup> These words speak to a teaching-learning paradigm dedicated to empowering the whole person, an imperative for creating classrooms where students, as opposed to content, are the focal point. The commitment to such an environment can be viewed as a link between the discourses of Laban Studies and critical pedagogy, one that illuminates how Laban Studies can be examined as a pedagogical praxis.

### **Community as a Pedagogical Tenet**

A critical pedagogy classroom is at once welcoming and challenging, as characteristics such as dialogue, collaboration, inclusion, and reciprocity are in play. These identifiers, individually and collectively, underscore community building, a key tenet of critical pedagogy and, I suggest, a philosophical underpinning of Laban Studies. Exploring a commonality of community offers an opportunity to further focus this inquiry through questions such as, how does illuminating the characteristic of community building facilitate a particular

---

13. Paulo Freire quoted in Antonio Darder, "Teaching as an Act of Love: Reflections on Paulo Freire and His Contributions to our Lives and Our Work," in *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, 573.

14. Lisa Ullmann in Rudolf Laban, *Modern Educational Dance*, 3rd ed., rev., Lisa Ullmann (1948; Boston: Plays, Inc., 1980), 180.

15. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (NY & Great Britain: Routledge, 1994), 15.

understanding of pedagogical beliefs and values rooted in Laban Studies, and how can we, as educators, use the sensibility of community embedded in Laban Studies to inform the *how* and *why* of our teaching?

Critical pedagogues and scholars assert that it is the process of building community, as opposed to the outcome, that carries educational value.<sup>16</sup> Through this process, trust and mutual respect among all stakeholders evolves, traits that are integral to a caring and ethical teaching environment. Learners participate in building a classroom defined by cooperation and collaboration as a platform for “an education that is focused on human praxis—the thoughtful and conscious struggle to reshape [a] world into one that is more just and compassionate.”<sup>17</sup> Feminist educator Myria Allen and her colleagues intentionally insert the significance of community into the pedagogical terrain because they recognize that through “the transformational potential of community and connectedness. . . . a world where people link together . . . and act toward the good of a more equitable society” becomes possible.<sup>18</sup>

The notion of community as a springboard for building an equitable and humane society is especially prominent in Laban’s writings about choreography and movement choirs. Forming a community by dancers coming together through shared values speaks to Laban’s sense of community as an expression of human dignity, and the importance of maintaining such dignity.<sup>19</sup> Through his personal musings on movement choirs, as well as those of his student-collaborators, the particularities of Laban’s vision of community as a pedagogical perspective surface. For example, in a reflection about *Titan*, the 1927 large movement choir work, Laban wrote: “I visualized the spirit of community like a giant, a Titan who can and will break all fetters, and open up all the springs of humanity.”<sup>20</sup> Martin Gleisner, intimately associated with Laban’s movement choirs, recalls Laban’s speaking of movement choirs as a means to express the power of community, “a basic sense for reaching essential humanity.”<sup>21</sup> Vera Maletić, Laban scholar and

---

16. See Allen et al., “Feminist Pedagogy,” *Academic Exchange Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (2002): 67–72; Shrewsbury, “What is Feminist Pedagogy?” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 1/2 (1997): 166–73.

17. Sherry Shapiro, “Toward Transformative Teachers,” in *Dance, Power, and Difference: Critical and Feminist Perspectives on Dance Education*, ed. S. Shapiro (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1998), 9.

18. Allen et al., “Feminist Pedagogy,” 69.

19. John Hodgson and Valerie Preston-Dunlop, *Rudolf Laban: An Introduction to his Work & Influence* (Plymouth, Great Britain: Northcote House Publishers, 1990).

20. Laban quoted in Valerie Preston-Dunlop, *Rudolf Laban: Man of Theatre* (Hampshire, Great Britain: Dance Books, 2013), 70.

21. Laban quoted in Martin Gleisner, “Movement Choirs,” *Laban Art of Movement Guild Magazine* (November 1979), 11.



educator, writes of Laban's commitment to community in order to advocate for a better world. Recalling her experiences with Laban, she states:

Laban conceived of movement choirs as a medium providing an experience of togetherness, as community through dance. . . . However, he emphasized that besides the shared experience of the joyful movement, the crucial task of the movement choirs was to maintain a sense of humanity in a dignified form.<sup>22</sup>

It is also noteworthy that movement choirs were as much about the single dancer as the group, created and rehearsed in ways for individuals to celebrate their uniqueness as movers. Although such a statement might seem like a paradox to the sensibility of community, it was not. Movement choirs were not a call for uniformity, a misconceived notion that gave way to a clash of ideologies in the 1930s between the rising Nazi regime and Laban and his collaborators.<sup>23</sup> Rather, movement choirs, then and now, take shape through respecting the differences between and among individuals. As Gleisner states, "This education does not suppress individuality—rather it encourages it."<sup>24</sup> Laban scholar John Hodgson also speaks to this entwining relationship. "The individual gains personal satisfaction in a social situation. Taking part in a movement choir helps each person gain confidence through the group."<sup>25</sup> The philosophical underpinnings of movement choirs that took root at the start of the 20th century can be looked upon as a foreshadowing of connected knowing, a pedagogical orientation gaining recognition towards the end of the century. Extensively written discussed by Mary Belenky and colleagues in their landmark text, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, connected knowing can best be thought of as knowledge emerging through relationships with others. This is to say, "Authority in connected knowing rests not on power or status . . . but on commonality of experience."<sup>26</sup> For critical pedagogues, honoring each learner as an individual is central to how communities take shape in their classrooms. Critical feminist educator-researcher Carolyn Shrewsbury recognizes community building as a dynamic entity. Because of this, she advocates for community building strategies that emerge through the reconceptualization of community, one that values the *and* between the polarities of individual autonomy and that of an aggregate of individuals. She envisions such reconfigurations as a celebration of the "autonomy and individuality of

---

22. Maletić, *Body—Space—Expression*. (Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter, 1987), 14–15.

23. Bradley, *Rudolf Laban*.

24. Martin Gleisner, "Movement Choirs," *Laban Art of Movement Guild Magazine* (November 1979): 8–11.

25. John Hodgson, *Mastering Movement*, (NY: Routledge, 2001): 193–94.

26. Mary Belenky et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing*. (NY: BasicBooks, 1997): 118.

members who share a sense of relationship and connectedness with each other.”<sup>27</sup> Community-based dance practitioner Christine Lomas further underscores the vibrant connection between the individual and others of the group when stating, “individuals empower communities.”<sup>28</sup> With these various re-mediations of community, we are invited to engage in community building in a manner that encourages both students and teachers to become aware of themselves in connection to others, to understand the experiences, passions, and concerns of all participants of the emerging community. Rather than being an erasure of differences, building community becomes an activity in which each individual honors and respects differences while everyone also continues to strive towards shared goals.

None of this is intended to ignore the tensions and conflicts that can surface through the process of building community. However, often as a result of such challenges, unique opportunities can arise due to the negotiating that occurs between the voices of autonomous individuals and those of the collective whole.<sup>29</sup> Dance educator Eeva Antilla, in writing about a dialogic approach to teaching, speaks to such negotiations as a crucial element in making meaning, and how “learning through collaborative action and reflection strengthens communities.”<sup>30</sup> Sherry Shapiro, critical feminist dance educator and Laban practitioner, also recognizes the unique learning that can unfold through community. Recalling a dance making experience with her students, she writes of a change “from one of learning the movement vocabulary for the sake of creating dance to gaining an understanding of the self, others and the larger world for the possibility of change.”<sup>31</sup> While reminiscing about his own life in 1935, Laban recalled a time in Munich when he had been assuming responsibilities for directing a festival. At first overwhelmed, he came to realize that great festivals needed much more than one person’s artistic ideas, and he wrote how “great festivals in life . . . should concentrate on deepening the sense of mutuality and the appreciation of the personal identity of each individual.”<sup>32</sup> His words continue to underscore the values within today’s community-based dance practices.

---

27. Shrewsbury, “What is Feminist Pedagogy?” 170.

28. Christine Lomas, “Cultural Constructs, Community, and Celebration,” in *The Community Performance Reader*, ed. Petra Kuppers and Gwen Robertson (NY: Routledge, 2007), 214.

29. Petra Kuppers, “Community Arts Practices: Improvising Being Together,” in *The Community Performance Reader*, ed. Petra Kuppers and Gwen Robertson (NY: Routledge, 2007), 34-47.

30. Eeva Antilla, “Dialogical Pedagogy, Embodied Knowledge, and Meaningful Learning,” in *Dance in a World of Change*, ed. S. Shapiro (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2008), 177.

31. Shapiro, “Critical and Feminist Perspectives in Dance Education,” 15.

32. Rudolf Laban, *A Life for Dance*, translated and annotated by Lisa Ullmann (London: Macdonald & Evans, 1975), 84.

### Dialoguing Parts to Whole/Whole to Parts

The theme of “parts to whole” remains a constant throughout Laban Studies. Highlighting the ongoing interplay between the framework’s components, this characteristic can be found to lie within the specifics of an action, a movement phrase, a dance, as well as a cohort of people underlying the interrelatedness of structure, expression, communication, and human behavior.<sup>33</sup> The theme “parts to whole” also underscores approaches used in Laban Studies to engage in teaching and learning movement and in sustaining the dynamics of a community.

It is important to note that the overarching purpose for Laban and his colleagues was always to better understand the whole. Distilling a movement’s ingredients to investigate its particularities was secondary.<sup>34</sup> For it was through experiencing the fluidity of a movement’s components that one could then capture its gestalt. Ed Groff, Laban practitioner and educator, confirms this in his description of Laban Movement Analysis. He writes:

As a language of description, [the LMA system] provides a means for differentiation of the elements within the gestalt process of movement. It provides a vocabulary for distinguishing the significant features of an expressive statement while recognizing that it is the interrelatedness of the different parts that gives movement expression its meaning.<sup>35</sup>

The challenge with such a through line, as Groff so rightly notes, “is to differentiate without fragmentation.”<sup>36</sup> Irmgard Bartenieff reasserts this notion in her groundbreaking text, *Body Movement: Coping with the Environment*. She notes, “Obviously, the experience of self as a whole transcends the consciousness of specific parts, but understanding the parts helps one to recreate the whole, to enliven its mobility and to play harmoniously with a continuously changing environment.”<sup>37</sup> Her statement echoes what many of Laban’s early followers and students experienced in working with and observing Laban. His students recall him as a “minister of the ‘inner and outer’ affairs of dance”<sup>38</sup> while striving to fit all movement parts into a whole. Such remembrances reveal Laban’s ongoing

---

33. Lynn Renee Cohen, “Introduction to Labananalysis: Effort/Shape,” in *CORD Dance Research Annual IX* (NY: CORD, 1978), 53–58.

34. Ed Groff, “Laban Movement Analysis: An Historical, Philosophical, and Theoretical Perspective” (MFA thesis, University of Connecticut, 1990).

35. Groff, “Laban Movement Analysis: An Historical, Philosophical, and Theoretical Perspective,” 99.

36. Ibid.

37. Irmgard Bartenieff, *Body Movement: Coping with the Environment* (NY: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1980), 47.

38. Maletić, *Body—Space—Expression*, 29.

concern with relationships, whether it be constructing movement choirs, establishing relationships of body parts for his emerging notation system, or integrating expressive and functional movement.<sup>39</sup>

Although critical pedagogy terms such as dialogue, inclusion, and reciprocity do not lie within the statements of Laban, Bartenieff, or other collaborators, I suggest a sensibility of these terms certainly does. In *The Mastery of Movement*, for example, Laban draws upon the metaphor of an orchestra and the significance of its individual instruments to create the orchestra's harmonious music. "Its various parts can combine in concerted action, or one part may perform alone as a 'soloist' while others accompany. Each action of a particular part of the body has to be understood in relation to the whole which should always be affected. . . ."<sup>40</sup> Laban's student-collaborators, as well as current Laban practitioners, scholars, and educators, affirm how the interplay of such identifying characteristics is integral to "parts to whole/whole to parts," including being integral to building community. It is readily evident that for Laban and his collaborators, the harmony of movement could not occur without dialogue and reciprocity occurring through the "parts to whole/whole to parts" of the moving body.

### Claiming a Perspective

The journey to explore Laban Studies as a pedagogical praxis initially stemmed from my questions about *what* and *how* students were learning in Laban courses and, equally relevant, *how* and *why* concepts were being taught in these courses. Weaving my questions through the discourse of critical pedagogy did not seem outlandish. As an educator, my commitment to both is genuine and integrated into my teaching philosophy. In addition, scholars in the two fields emphasize a teaching-learning paradigm that is at once student-centered and transformative. The decision to focus on the particular pedagogical tenet of community, although not necessarily an intentional choice, can be linked to my involvement with community-based dance practices.

With those biases noted, I cannot ignore the fact that community building opens windows to possibilities associated with contexts other than a teaching-learning paradigm. Moreover, depending upon the nature of the query, a different investigative frame would certainly be appropriate. For example, a political or socio-cultural lens to interrogate community would have more validity if the inquiry focused on the world landscape in which Laban lived in the 1930s and 40s. With that context, mining Laban's writings and those of his cohorts would

---

39. See Groff, "Laban Movement Analysis: An Historical, Philosophical, and Theoretical Perspective," 101 and Maletić, *Body—Space—Expression*, 125.

40. Laban, *Mastery of Movement*, 34.

disclose community in a very different way. His attitudes and those of his colleagues on topics such as gender, ethnicity, and nationalism would be crucial to the discussion in ways that were not with the context of pedagogy.

I also recognize that I am not the first person who has considered Laban, his writings, and Laban Studies in a context that looks beyond him being a European white male influenced by politics and culture of the first half of the 20th century. My intention was not to ignore or dismiss other contexts that carry importance in the world—then and today. My purpose in interrogating Laban Studies through a critical pedagogy lens was to explore the possibilities of creating a platform for engaging with the Laban Studies framework through fresh eyes. I certainly am not the only person to examine Laban Studies using a pedagogical lens, as readily evidenced by the publication of the proceedings from the 2008 Laban International Conference.<sup>41</sup> Throughout this text, the importance to contextualize the writings of Laban and his collaborators to glean the place of Laban Studies in present day pedagogy is highlighted.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps by adding my voice through the lens of critical pedagogy and building community, can further support the challenges to re-negotiate the role of Laban Studies in today's changing world and allow Laban's "hidden legacy"<sup>43</sup> to be less hidden.

## Discussion

The time Laban spent in Ascona during the 1900s had a profound impact upon him. In a sense, this marked the beginnings of his legacy, hidden or otherwise. It was there that his ideas about community and notions of a new dance form began to take shape. Within what was often referred to as a utopian setting, he could challenge prevailing cultural views and "rationalist assumptions about the relationship between mind and body . . . to find a different way of the interrelationship of self-other world."<sup>44</sup> These ideas are reflected in the how and why of the origins of Laban integrating mind-body in terms of movement practice, a notion holding currency today, but not at the turn of the century or even later in 1958 when Laban spoke of the "unitary function of body and mind."<sup>45</sup>

---

41. See Valerie Preston-Dunlop and Lesley-Anne Sayers, eds. *The Dynamic Body in Space* (Hampshire, Great Britain: Dance Books Ltd., 2010).

42. Michael Huxley, "Movement Concerns the Whole Man," in *The Dynamic Body in Space*, 95-103.

43. Maggie Killingsbeck, "Laban: The Way Forward in Dance Education, Research Project Report," in *The Dynamic Body in Space*, 118-23.

44. Jane Carr, "The Problem of Significance: Revisiting Aspects of Laban's Discussions of the Significance of Movement and Dance from a Twenty-First Century Perspective," in *The Dynamic Body in Space*, 4.

45. Rudolf Laban, "Movement Concerns the Whole of Man," excerpted in *Rudolf Laban Speaks about Movement and Dance*, edited by Lisa Ullmann (Surrey, Great Britain, 1970), 35.

It was a concept that impacted Laban in terms of his own teaching, as well as his broad thinking about dance education. For Laban, teaching was to facilitate what dancers needed to know. He invited his students, whether children, professionals, or laypeople, to find their unique voice. For once, they knew “how to use their bodies . . . and they could find their individual means of expression” that would in turn bring expressive movement communities to life.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, for Laban, this was the reason to move!<sup>47</sup>

Although the term mind-body/body-mind was neither necessarily prevalent in the first part of the 20th century, nor in Laban’s writings, the concept was, and remains, relevant to the framework. Today, many Laban practitioners, as well as those in other somatic practices, encourage students to listen to their body-mind in thought-action and valuing all that can be learned through such a learning process. Dance educator Cadence Whittier confirms the presence of body-mind integration in Laban Studies through the ways the concept supports her teaching of ballet. She notes, “the technique classroom can become a place where students practice physically that which they want to become.”<sup>48</sup> Martha Myers, a leading advocate of incorporating somatics into dance education, speaks of how “profoundly the [LMA] concepts can affect a performer’s qualities of movement, and extend a choreographer’s range of expression.”<sup>49</sup> Such statements remind us of Freire and Laban’s reflection of learning as a process of becoming, “to understand and to live as a process.” Whittier and Myers suggest that the interaction of body-mind in thought and action reflects a pedagogical praxis that lies at the heart of Laban Studies.

As we recognize the pedagogical underpinnings within Laban Studies, the framework also can be viewed as an inroad to an open learning environment, one that values the multiple experiences that everyone, individually and collectively, brings to the space. Students and teachers are challenged to share responsibility for what unfolds in the classroom—educators teaching with a mindset different from a traditional authoritative view often occurring in a dance studio and students coming to learn with a different mindset. Together such mindsets can begin to counter the sensibilities expressed in the opening anecdotes for this paper. The inference to Laban Studies as codified steps is in itself bewildering, as steps were always inconsequential to Laban. From the very onset, Laban’s work

---

46. Hodgson and Dunlop, *Rudolf Laban: An Introduction to His Work & Influence*, 36.

47. See Rudolf Laban, *Modern Educational Dance*, 3rd ed., rev., Lisa Ullmann, (1948; Boston: Plays, Inc., 1980); *The Mastery of Movement* 4th ed. (Estover, Plymouth, Great Britain: Macdonald & Evans, 1980).

48. Cadence Whittier, “Classical Ballet Pedagogy, The Dancer as Active Contributor,” In *The Dynamic Body in Space*, 245.

49. Cited in interview with Rebecca Nettle-Fiol, “Somatics: A Current Moving the River of Contemporary Dance.” In *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training*, eds. Melanie Bales and Rebecca Nettle-Fiol (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 93.

was intended to offer a broader focus than on performance improvement. He was committed to developing a framework that provided an inroad to understanding and building dances and, as dance educator-scholar Ann Kipling Brown clearly states, “a way of teaching, a reflective pedagogy that accounts for the needs of the students.”<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps his ideas could be criticized for being idealistic, especially when juxtaposing them with today’s world that is often characterized as fragmented, chaotic, and competitive. To diminish this critique, critical pedagogue and Laban educator Isabel Marques addresses how Laban’s ideas are crucial to countering today’s educational terrain. Using Laban’s philosophical views in conjunction with those of Freire to support her teaching and dance making, Marques intentionally engages in the complexities of today’s world. Asking student-dancers to dialogue with her and each other through components of Laban Studies, she challenges everyone to bring in all their experiences in order to locate their dancing and learning within a larger social context. Her emphasis on dialogue within Laban Studies highlights, once again, the importance of interaction and relationships within the framework.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the process of learning that Marques proposes is crucial in today’s world of fragmentation. It supports a landscape that nurtures the dignity of individuals while also embracing the democratic learning of participating in a community. For at the very core of community, one can find an environment for sharing life experiences through meaningful dialogue and critical reflection.

Laban scholars recognize that the framework’s pedagogical underpinnings hold value in today’s world, even though they also even though they also acknowledge that much has changed since Laban formulated his theories. Laban intuitively understood that the world would always be in flux, and thus we would need to continually invest in the *how* and *why* of our teaching. Perhaps this idea is best expressed in his own words, when writing towards the end of his life in 1957,

Beyond the constant insecurities of busy-ness and emotion . . . we have the gift of conscious penetration into the realms of art, as the highest representative of our capacity to dream. Guidance in the keeping alive of this capacity seems to me to be Education through the Arts. This is at least undeniably so in all our dealing with the many forms of the art of movement.<sup>52</sup>

---

50. Ann Kipling Brown, “A Model for Dance Education: Promoting Personal Voice and Communal Learning,” *International Journal of Education through Art* 10, no. 2 (2014): 181.

51. Marques, “Dance Education in/and the Postmodern.”

52. Laban, “Education through the Arts,” 6.

### Some Final Thoughts

Uncovering embedded characteristics of critical pedagogy in the writings of Laban and those of his collaborators, whether in relation to choreography, theory, or teaching, was not that surprising. Advocating for a transformative education served as Laban's call for educators to honor the individuality of each learner, to encourage a multiplicity of perspectives, and to build a community where teachers and students can be committed to learning. As discussed, these characteristics entwine with identifying characteristics of critical pedagogy; however, what did catch me by surprise was the poignancy of each field's commitment to community from a perspective of human dignity. With both fields embracing community as a process of unfolding interrelationships of self with others, fostering community becomes an inroad to learning as a means to become engaged in the larger world. It is with this understanding that the process of forging a community invites educators to participate in a transformative democratic pedagogy.

Exploring Laban Studies through such a lens affords unique opportunities when re-visiting the questions of this query. Can illuminating shared principles between critical pedagogy and Laban Studies facilitate a deeper understanding of pedagogical beliefs and values rooted in Laban Studies? Are we, educators, using all that is embedded in Laban Studies to inform the *how* and *why* of our teaching? Hopefully this discussion has created avenues for such understanding while also opening windows to further examine our pedagogy, philosophically and in practice. I have come to firmly believe that if we, as individual educators, become engaged anew in Laban Studies, we can reinvest in the tenets of Laban Studies to build authentic learning communities and begin to rethink what it means to be a Laban educator for the 21st century. In doing so, we gain the potential to create a transformative pedagogical landscape that is open to the full realm of possibilities embedded within Laban Studies.

### Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Carol-Lynne Moore, Motus Humanus, and Teresa Heiland for their support and belief in the value of this query.

### Bibliography

Allen, Myria, Kandi Walker, and Lynne Webb. "Feminist Pedagogy: Identifying Basic Principles." *Academic Exchange Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (2002): 67–72.



- Antilla, Eeva. "Dialogical Pedagogy, Embodied Knowledge, and Meaningful Learning." In *Dance in a World of Change*, ed. Sherry Shapiro, 159–79. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2008.
- Barr, Sherrie, and Doug Risner. "Weaving Social Foundations through Dance Pedagogy: A Pedagogy of Uncovering." *Journal of Dance Education* 14, no. 4 (2014): 36–145.
- Bartenieff, Irmgard. *Body Movement: Coping with the Environment*. NY: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1980.
- Belenky, Mary F., Blythe M. Clinchy, Nancy R. Goldberger, and Jill M. Tarule. *Women's Ways of Knowing*. NY: BasicBooks, 1997.
- Bradley, Karen. *Rudolf Laban*. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Burnidge, Anne. "Somatics in the Dance Studio: Embodying Feminist/Democratic Pedagogy." *Journal of Dance Education* 12, no. 2 (2012): 37–47.
- Carr, Jane. "The Problem of Significance: Revisiting Aspects of Laban's Discussions of the Significance of Movement and Dance from a Twenty-First Century Perspective." In *The Dynamic Body in Space*, eds. Valerie Preston-Dunlop and Lesley-Anne Sayers, 46–55. Hampshire, Great Britain: Dance Books Ltd., 2010.
- Cohen, Lynn Renee. "Labananalysis for the Social Scientist with a General Systems Perspective." In *Dance Research Annual IX*, 145–53. NY: Congress on Research in Dance, Inc., 1978.
- Darder, Antonia. "Teaching as an Act of Love: Reflections on Paulo Freire and His Contributions to Our Lives and Our Work." In *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, 2nd ed., eds. Antonio Darder, Marta Baltodano, and Rodolfo Torres, 567–78. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Darder, Antonio, Marta Baltodano, and Rodolfo Torres. "Critical Pedagogy: An Introduction." In *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, 2nd ed., eds. Antonio Darder, Marta Baltodano, and Rodolfo Torres, 1–20. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Dyer, Becky. "Increasing Psychosomatic Understanding through Laban Movement Analysis and Somatic Oriented Frameworks: Connections of Performance Processes to Knowledge Construction." In *Dance: Current Selected Research*, v. 7, eds. Lynnette Y. Overby and Billie Lepczyk, 59–81. NY: AMS Press, 2009.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. NY: Continuum, 1970.
- Gleisner, Martin. "Movement Choirs." *Laban Art of Movement Guild Magazine* November (1979): 8–11.
- Groff, Ed. 1990. "Laban Movement Analysis: An Historical, Philosophical, and Theoretical Perspective." MFA thesis, Connecticut College, 1990.
- Hodgson, John. *Mastering Movement: The Life and Work of Rudolf Laban*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

- Hodgson, John, and Valerie Preston-Dunlop. *Rudolf Laban: An Introduction to His Work & Influence*. Plymouth, Great Britain: Northcote House Publishers, 1990.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress*. NY and Great Britain: Routledge, 1994.
- Huxley, Michael. “Movement Concerns the Whole Man.” In *The Dynamic Body in Space*, eds. Valerie Preston-Dunlop and Lesley-Anne Sayers, 95–103. Hampshire, Great Britain: Dance Books Ltd., 2010.
- Killingbeck, Maggie. “Laban: The Way Forward in Dance Education, Research Project Report.” In *The Dynamic Body in Space*, eds. Valerie Preston-Dunlop and Lesley-Anne Sayers, 118–23. Hampshire, Great Britain: Dance Books Ltd., 2010.
- Kipling Brown, Ann. “A Model for Dance Education: Promoting Personal Voice and Communal Learning.” *International Journal of Education through Art* 10, no. 2 (2014): 179–188.
- Kuppers, Petra. “Community Arts Practices: Improvising Being-Together.” In *The Community Performance Reader*, eds. Petra Kuppers and Gwen Robertson, 34–47. NY: Routledge, 2007.
- Laban, Rudolf. *A Life for Dance*. 1935. Translated and annotated by Lisa Ullmann. 1935. Reprint, London: Macdonald & Evans, 1975.
- . *Modern Educational Dance*. 1948. 3rd ed. Revised by Lisa Ullmann. London: Plays, Inc., 1980.
- . *The Mastery of Movement*, 4th ed. Estover, Plymouth, Great Britain: Macdonald & Evans, 1980.
- . “Education Through the Arts.” In *Rudolf Laban Speaks about Movement and Dance*, 1957. ed. Lisa Ullmann, 3–6. Reprint, Surrey, Great Britain: Laban Art of Movement Centre, 1970.
- Lomas, Christine. “Cultural Constructs, Community, and Celebration.” In *The Community Performance Reader*, eds. Petra Kuppers and Gwen Robertson, 213–216. NY: Routledge, 2007.
- Maletić, Vera. *Body—Space—Expression: The Development of Rudolf Laban’s Movement and Dance Concepts*. Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter, 1987.
- Marques, Isabel. “Dance Education in/and the Postmodern.” In *Dance, Power, and Difference: Critical and Feminist Perspectives on Dance Education*, ed. Sherry Shapiro, 171–185. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1998.
- Nettl-Fiol, Rebecca. “Somatics: A Current Moving the River of Contemporary Dance—An Interview with Martha Myers.” In *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training*, eds. Melanie Bales and Rebecca Nettl-Fiol, 89–100. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

- Novack, Cynthia. "Looking at Movement as Culture: Contact Improvisation to Disco." *The Drama Review* 32, no. 4 (1998): 102–119.
- Ottey, Sherilyn. "Critical Pedagogical Theory and the Dance Educator." *Arts Education Policy Review* 98, no. 2 (1996): 31–39.
- Preston-Dunlop, Valerie. *Rudolph Laban: An Extraordinary Life*. London: Dance Books, 1998.
- . *Rudolf Laban: Man of Theatre*. Hampshire, Great Britain: Dance Books, 2013.
- Preston-Dunlop, Valerie, and Lesley-Anne Sayers, eds. *The Dynamic Body in Space*. Alton, Hampshire, Great Britain: Dance Books Ltd., 2010.
- Shapiro, Sherry B. "Toward Transformative Teachers: Critical and Feminist Perspectives in Dance Education." In *Dance, Power, and Difference: Critical and Feminist Perspectives on Dance Education*, ed. Sherry Shapiro, 7–22. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1998.
- Shrewsbury, Carolyn. "What is feminist pedagogy?" 1987. *Women's Studies Quarterly* Reprint, 25, no. 1/2 (1997): 166–73.
- Siegel, Marcia. "The Green Table: Sources of a Classic." *Dance Research Journal* 22, no. 1 (1989): 15–21.
- Whittier, Cadence. "Classical Ballet Pedagogy, The Dancer as Active Contributor." In *The Dynamic Body in Space*, eds. Valerie Preston-Dunlop and Lesley-Anne Sayers, 235–246. Hampshire, Great Britain: Dance Books Ltd., 2010.